

WYCOMBE'S TITLE HOPES WAVER AS UNITED HOLD OUT

By **STUART EARP** Wycombe Wanderers 0, Sutton United 0

SUTTON UNITED withstood a tremendous second half corner barrage, including five in three minutes, to dent Wycombe Wanderers' hopes of the Rothmans Isthmian League title at Loakes Park on Saturday. Overall, the Blues notched an incredible 22 flag kicks to Sutton's three.

But in the end, the corner ratio meant absolutely nothing. As everyone knows, there are no prizes for pressure and Wanderers could well rue the loss of this point when the championship race really heats up towards the later stages of the season.

Wycombe must be disturbed with their recent performances. It all started at Clapton on March 9. There they just managed to pull off a 3-2 victory against one of the league's weakest clubs. Then came the Oxford defeat, when the Blues went down 0-1. Saturday's game was really a continuation of that game at the White House ground.

No one wants a bad run at this stage of the season and Wycombe's current loss of form could hardly have come at a worse time. Having climbed to the top of Division One, they

needed a period of consolidation and steady point building. And at present, one has to say, they hardly look championship material.

So just why have Wanderers slumped recently? Manager Brian Lees puts it down to overconfidence and the wrong attitude to the game. He could well be right. Had Wycombe played throughout the match with their second half determination, Saturday's outcome could have been very different.

The main reason for the decline though, is the lack of goalscoring ability. Suddenly the Blues have stopped winning their £40 bonuses from Rothmans and right now, it seems nothing is going right for them upfront. Dylan Evans' loss of form has a lot to do with it, but he must not shoulder all the blame. Steve Perrin battles on but seems to have lost confidence while Tony Horseman is seen all too rarely. And when "Rodger" does get those imitable touches going, his fellow forwards seldom seem to anticipate the moves.

Thankfully for Wycombe, the defence, although rarely tested either by Oxford or Sutton, is performing adequately. Dave Bullock and Keith Mead looked sound enough on Saturday while

Roger Grant returned for Paul Birdseye and also produced a competent performance. On the other flank Derek Gamblin, also back in the side, struggled to knit into the team. Late in the game he was showing us some old touches, but lack of pace caught him out and on more than one occasion he had difficulty in keeping the ball in play on the touchline.

For once, Wanderers were below their best in midfield. Larry Pritchard looked jaded and a victim of too much football while Terry Reardon began well but gave the ball away too readily later on. All too little was seen of Mick Holifield.

Add a fine performance from visiting goalkeeper Ian Stuart, plus the presence of Ted Powell at the back, and you have the ingredients for the Blues frustration on Saturday.

Powell, who recently celebrated 50 England appearances, was soon into his stride, robbing Holifield just as he was about to shoot in the seventh minute. Sixty seconds later Reardon caught Bullock's cross on the volley but Stuart was perfectly positioned to deal with the shot. It was the goalkeeper's ability to be in the right place at the right time that

often thwarted Wycombe.

Tony Copping got in Sutton's first reply in the 10th minute but he was too far out to worry John Maskell, who saved with ease. Soon afterwards Gamblin timed his interception perfectly when Steve Waller burst through.

Even in these early stages it was apparent that Wycombe were lacking the much needed punch and bite upfront. The approach work was good but the finish poor. The same could be said of Sutton, who also rarely looked like troubling Maskell.

It was not until the 32nd minute that Wycombe went close again. This time Powell's clearance struck Horseman and fell to Perrin. Leaving John Neary stranded inside the box, Perrin swivelled and curled in a shot just past the post. Then six minutes later the home side put together one of the best moves of the match. Pritchard fed Gamblin who sent a long ball up to Horseman. Rodger slipped it to Evans who in turn passed to Holifield. Mick's cross was nudged on to Perrin, but his full blooded shot was taken first time by Stuart. It was a rare glimpse of Wycombe's cohesive football.

Graham Dennis was trapped off-side to end a promising United break in the 42nd minute but the half time whistle brought

fresh hope of an improved performance from Wycombe.

At first it seemed this would not materialise. In the opening minute of the second period Maskell's goalkick was thumped straight back by Reardon. Waller intercepted and seemed odds on to score but Maskell forced him out wide and the shot was too high. Then Waller again went close when he latched onto Powell's through ball and cracked in a drive just past the post.

Wanderers hit back in the 56th minute. A long goalkick by Maskell was nodded on by Perrin. Horseman and Powell were level in pursuit and as Stuart advanced, Horseman managed to get his boot to the ball, only to see his effort hit the goalkeeper's legs and roll for a corner.

Three quick corners followed but came to nothing and it was Sutton who almost snatched the lead in the 65th minute. Young Gavin Fraser, just 19, found space inside the box and nearly deflected Dennis's hard cross past Maskell.

Wycombe soon hit back, showing more fight and spirit, plus a touch of desperation. After 73 minutes Bullock headed on Holifield's inswinging flag kick to Horseman, whose header seemed destined for the top cor-

ner of the net. Stuart, however, flung himself full length and tipped the ball over the crossbar.

Then came the amazing string of corners - five on the trot. All except one were inswingers by Holifield and one felt more variation might have brought better fortune. From the fifth flag kick Perrin forced a header narrowly wide.

In the closing stages, Wycombe mounted one final tired assault on the overworked visitors' defence. Gamblin forced another fine stop from Stuart with a low shot from Reardon's free kick and then in the very last minute - of the game, Reardon wasted one of the best chances throughout the 90 minutes.

Holifield sent over the 22nd corner. The ball must have been inside the area for at least 30 seconds, being deflected and charged down before Reardon, about eight yards from the goal, blasted the ball - and Wycombe last opportunity - over the crossbar.

WYCOMBE: J. Maskell; D. Gamblin, K. Mead, D. Bullock, R. Grant; L. Pritchard, T. Reardon, M. Holifield; A. Horseman, S. Perrin, D. Evans. Sub. P. Wood (not used).

SUTTON: L. Stuart; A. Gilbert, R. Bradshaw, K. Powell, J. Neary, G. Fraser, D. Butterfill, K. Reeve; G. Dennis, A. Copping, S. Waller. Sub. R. Kidd (not used).

Referee: K. G. Salmon (Barnet).
Official paving attendance: 1,510.
Approximate total attendance: 1,900.